

abilities

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DANCERS WITH DISABILITIES

PROFILES IN MOVEMENT

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In Conversation with
Pamela Wallin

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dancers with

BLURRING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS OF ABILITY AND DISABILITY

Frank Hull

FRANK HULL's motorized wheelchair hums to the other end of the dance floor. He rolls toward me at full speed, and slams on the brakes. His body is propelled forward, toward mine and then falls back into his chair with a grace that most people don't associate with wheelchairs.

"I learned that in Cleveland," he said, referring to the *Dancing Wheels* company, where he received a week-long dance scholarship. Frank, who has cerebral palsy, brought the skills back to Toronto for his performance in October, 1999.

By choreographing dancers with disabilities, and having able-bodied dancers dance in wheelchairs, we can incorporate movements only possible with specific disabilities. The grace and flow one expects from a dancer can be maintained and the social constructs of "ability" and "disability" do not just blur — they disappear.

Debbie Wilson, Frank's choreographer, makes clear why these goals are compatible with the art of contemporary dance.

Contemporary dance as opposed to classical ballet aims to choreograph in accordance with how bodies realistically and individually move, whether the dancers have or do not have socially defined "disabilities."

"There are many schools of contemporary dance," she says, which all developed through choreographers designing techniques to suit the abilities and limitations of different body types. Debbie



Wilson is merely continuing the tradition, developing a technique that suits Frank Hull's body.

Frank's piece is an interesting one. He is the "Caretaker," which is also the title of the dance and seems to carry both a literal and figurative connotation. Frank's partner, Tracy Patterson, plays the vulnerable role throughout the piece. The audience views Frank as his hand moves along the contours of Tracy's body, while

they glide across the stage, often on the floor. Later, Frank points to different positions around the room waving his arm in a circle. Tracy dances around him in perfect synchronization. Frank moves the chair rhythmically to the music.

The dynamic of their relationship can be interpreted in different ways: Tracy on the one hand takes a stereotypically feminine role; Frank is dominant, unexpected of a person with a disability of either gender. I remember that Frank took on a primary nurturing role for a friend who died from AIDS-related complications. When asked about this, Frank acknowledged that he does "draw from personal experiences... to add power to the dance." He adds, "the traditional relationship between a person who is able-bodied and a person who has a disability is that the one with a disability is in need of care, we want to break the traditional view and try to reverse the roles."

When asked using the motorized wheelchair, Frank answered, "bringing the chair into the dance was not something I was going to do, but then I decided why not show both realities... (It) was difficult, because I had to time the chair... I have to balance my body with the chair to make it flow... How I control the chair becomes more important than the chair... When I use my chair, it's like a glove."

Most would never think to compare something as heavy as a motorized wheelchair to a glove, yet Frank suc-

disabilities

WITH THE GRACE OF DANCE BY MORDECAI DRACHE

ceeded in making the connection. The audience seemed to stare in wonder as the motorized wheelchair was transformed into something as controlled as a dancer's limb.

Spirit Synott

STAND-UP DANCER Viv Moore is lying underneath Spirit's manual wheelchair. Spirit rolls forward, oblivious to the existence of another human literally under her. Then Spirit runs into her. Viv grabs Spirit's chair, and combat takes place. Spirit uses Wen-do techniques to defend herself.

Viv goes to the wheelchair and tries it out. As Spirit attempts to reclaim it she uses the handle to pull herself up and challenge Viv at eye-level. They then push the chair away and embrace. Viv climbs atop Spirit's back and in wing-like motion spreads her arms and flies as Spirit plays the supportive one.

Spirit climbs upon Viv's back. Both of Spirit's arms flow out to the sides: it's her turn to fly. Simultaneously, they give the audience coy smiles before the lights fadeout.

The audience loves it, clapping wildly... or at least most of them. A woman with a disability leaves before the end.

This should not be surprising. Who has ever defined powerful art as something that does not provoke positive, as well as negative, responses? Spirit, who has spina bifida, speaks about this during an interview. "We can only speculate why she had to leave," but her exit leads Spirit to the topic that the performance

can't help but open: violence against women with disabilities.

Spirit is emphatic as she explains, "Women with disabilities are assaulted more than able-bodied women, and that's something people just don't want to talk about. I thought it was important to show that a person with a wheelchair could indeed defend him or herself, and this message is in the choreography."

Yet it would be inaccurate to portray

violence against women as the central theme of Spirit and Viv's piece. The combat in the dance represents part of a larger social phenomenon that the two dancers portray.

"The piece is about moving about in the world, and not being seen, like a shadow. You know (the shadow) is there, but you don't pay attention... then you find someone who was experiencing the exact same thing. There was a struggle, then a coming-together that was mutual; we understood each other's feelings and worked together."

Spirit met her dance partner, Viv Moore, at a workshop put on by the Toronto Theatre Alliance (TTA). Spirit says that she would not have been as interested if the participants were only performers with disabilities. "My life isn't about being disabled, but about integration, and that's why I dance with able-bodied partners. I think integration is important, so that we can work together and create harmony... The responses to the power of the piece from people of all walks of life were refreshing; it

showed me there is room for this kind of work."

In addition to dancing on stage, Spirit also danced in a film entitled *In Search of Joy* to the improvised music of a drum and a fiddle; dance, however, is not the only talent Spirit showcased in the performance. She has also taught Wen-do, a technique for women's self-defense and empowerment, and adapted the course to suit the needs of women



PHOTO BY BARRIE WENZELL